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# Alice Munro's "Silence": From the Politics of Silence to a Rhetoric of Silence

Corinne Bigot

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- 1 In "Silence," the final story of a trilogy including "Chance" and "Soon" anthologized in *Runaway*, the main protagonist suddenly finds herself estranged from her twenty-one-year old daughter who decides to go incommunicado. While the story brings to the foreground a theme that runs through many stories by Alice Munro—the role of silence within the network of domestic relations—it offers one of Munro's most complex explorations of the reverberations of silence. As the young woman uses her silence as a weapon to sever the relationship with her mother, effectively wounding and punishing her, the short story first focuses on the power of silence. The reader then becomes aware that another loss, another dismissal and another silence lie at the heart of the story. Although "Silence" apparently reads like a tale of unresolved grief, a reversal of the values of silence is at work in the short story. As it weaves the fate of its heroines into a Greek tale and denies closure, the story leads us away from powerlessness to hope, from the politics of silence to a "rhetoric of silence."<sup>1</sup>
  
- 2 In the opening scene, the main protagonist, Juliet, is on a ferry, crossing over to Denman Island to meet her daughter who has been spending six months on a retreat there. The crossing clearly signals a passage: Juliet will find Penelope gone, and this will change her life for ever. Penelope's disappearance and subsequent silence come as a complete shock to Juliet—if the reader accepts her point of view. In the first pages, Juliet's words to a woman she meets on the ferry and the silent speech she addresses to herself stress the strong bond between mother and daughter. She insists on Penelope's compassionate if not angelic nature: "*she has grace and compassion [...] She is also angelically pretty*" (128).<sup>2</sup> Yet the silent speech simultaneously undermines the contentions it puts forward, giving the lie to this vision of Penelope. A comparison with a caryatid ("Molded, I should say, like a caryatid", 128) apparently aims at stressing Penelope's classic beauty; yet the association with a marble or stone pillar also suggests

there is something hard in her nature. Since the word "caryatid" comes from the Greek Karuatis, a priestess of Karyae, a temple dedicated to Artemis, the comparison also indirectly links Penelope to Artemis, a rather revengeful goddess according to Greek mythology where she kills Acteon and Adonis for revenge. The simile, therefore, foreshadows Penelope's metamorphosis into a hard, implacable maiden who will strike her mother by proxy.<sup>3</sup>

- 3 Juliet's arrival makes it clear that Penelope has staged her absence and Juliet's meeting with Joan, who speaks for her. Penelope sent her mother a brief, cryptic note with a map of the island to help her find the Spiritual Balance Centre. Following the map, Juliet will come to what is, literally, a stage—"found herself parked in front of an old church [...] a simple stage" (128)—and then, by assimilation, a hospital ward: "private cubicles, as in a hospital ward" (129). On this stage and in this hospital ward, Juliet meets the woman who will engage her in a battle, using Penelope's absence and her own reticence as weapons with which to fight her. For silence in a conversation, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle points out, does not signal a refusal to communicate, it is a weapon that one can use to overpower one's adversary (Lecercle, 13).<sup>4</sup> However polite it seems to be, the conversation with the woman Juliet addresses "*disarmingly*,"<sup>5</sup> that is to say without a weapon, turns into a fierce battle, riddled with "hostility" (131). The presence of numerous dashes shows that Joan and Juliet keep interrupting each other. Juliet's interruptions gradually reveal her powerlessness, as she loses "control" of the contest. By the end of the battle, the "striking-looking woman"<sup>6</sup> of the first page will have become a stricken woman who walks away in tears, having been defeated by Joan's final silence:

She had not been able to walk away with dignity. She had turned and cried out beseechingly, furiously.  
"What did she tell you?"  
And Mother Shipton was standing there watching her [...] A fat pitying smile had stretched her closed lips as she shook her head. (135)

- 4 Penelope's refusal to speak to Juliet is presented as deliberate, "manipulative" silence, the purpose of which is to sever the relationship with her mother and to punish her for her supposed wrongs, effectively wounding her.<sup>7</sup> The manipulation is clearly shown by the "silent" birthday cards Penelope sends for five years. As they do not contain any written words, Juliet tries to read the postmarks—a vain attempt that mirrors her impossibility to decipher the cards' unspoken messages. Since they are sent on Penelope's, not Juliet's, birthdays, they both clearly indicate there is a message to interpret, as Juliet's friend surmises (134), and effectively conceal the meaning. They illustrate the power of manipulative silence and reticence whose purpose is to force the person who "receives" them to interpret what they mean (Lecercle, 12-13).<sup>8</sup> The role played by Joan, who both gives and withholds information, is of paramount importance. While she claims she is Penelope's spokesperson, voicing Penelope's grievances—"Not so *I* say, Juliet. So *Penelope* says" (132)—precisely what these grievances are remains unclear. Joan favours general assertions, or hypotheses; she phrases her answers, when she gives any, in such a way as to force Juliet to acquiesce, if not to express the blame herself, using phrases such as "you know" or negative questions. Penelope's absence and Joan's reticence effectively prevent Juliet from getting any clear answers, and help to exaggerate the blame. For with manipulative reticence and silence, the supposed wrongs are exaggerated and distorted (Jensen, 252). Juliet will spend many years trying to understand the reasons for the break-up,

agonisingly blaming herself. Juliet's conversations with her friends resonate with self-accusatory questions, and are punctuated by modal verbs expressing either regrets or self-reproach, such as the self-punitive cry, "I should have. I should have" (137).

- 5 The corrosive force of the woman's words will be made apparent when a sentence suddenly resurfaces in a later part of the story. Many years after the trip to Denman Island, Juliet sees a woman who looks like Joan:
 

would she not have reserves of buoyancy [...]  
Reserves of advice, pernicious advice, as well.  
*She has come to us in great hunger.* (153)
- 6 Italics arrest our attention, all the more so as the sentence in italics starts a new line and is followed by a blank space. In Munro's fiction, italics, which create a visual disturbance on the page, are used to signal a different form of speech, either unspoken, "silenced" speech, or words that silently reverberate in the character's memory. The sentence first appeared on page 132, in Roman letters. Since the words have been uttered before, Munro plays on the visual effect to evoke the verbal dimension: italics signal the resurfacing of words that affected Juliet as she first heard them. Not only does she remember the words, she hears them again in her head, they still have the power to hurt Juliet as they resurface from her memory. The blank space after the italics suggests a silence reverberating with pain and self-blame.
- 7 Since the reader shares Juliet's point of view, she sees Penelope's silence as a deadly weapon. She is also made to envision the estrangement as a death sentence for Juliet. Evoking Penelope's six-month absence in the first pages, the narrator underlines how difficult to bear it is for Juliet—"one day without some contact for her daughter is hard to bear, let alone six months" (127). Juliet's silent speech then prepares the reader to picture Penelope's silence as a form of death; the water and earth imagery suggesting Juliet might die if she is separated from her daughter: "*all this time I've been in a sort of desert, and when her message came I was like an old patch of cracked earth getting a full drink of rain*" (128). Juliet does not die but Penelope's absence causes much loneliness for her and Penelope's silence clearly reverberates in Juliet's life. Juliet's silent actions read like an answer to Penelope's silence. She empties her flat of every trace of Penelope's existence, first "banishing" every picture and any object associated with her from her daughter's room, then shutting the bedroom door, as if to shut out the pain of her absence (136); she finally gathers together Penelope's possessions into garbage bags when she moves out, storing them in a friend's basement, effectively putting them out of sight. The narrator's remark that "after a while the world seemed emptied of the people Penelope had known" (134-5) suggests that with Penelope's absence, Juliet's world has been "hollowed out."<sup>9</sup> Juliet also gradually loses contact with her own friends (151). Time references gradually become fewer and extremely vague, suggesting very little happens in Juliet's life, conveying the impression of a lonely and empty life. Furthermore, Juliet is rarely shown communicating with others. The main section of "Silence", which describes her life after Penelope's disappearance and before she meets Heather, contains very few dialogues and few sentences in direct speech: there are only three conversations with Christa and a very brief one with her friend Larry.
- 8 For Juliet also refuses to talk about Penelope's disappearance, and more radically, about Penelope, to most people, including her lovers: "she had a boyfriend who had never heard anything about her daughter" (150)—the passive voice helps convey the impression of an unavoidable, inescapable silence that is no longer the result of her

conscious will. Neither Juliet nor her next boyfriend ever mention Penelope so that when Juliet hears about Penelope, she will not be able to tell Gary about it, their initial silence having effectively silenced her.

- 9 It is no coincidence, therefore, that two silent speeches feature prominently in "Silence". The first speech occurs while Juliet is speaking to a woman on the ferry to Denman Island. They are the words she "could have said" (128) about Penelope and their relationship; its very presence foretells Juliet's later silences. It is echoed by a second silent speech, the words Juliet "might have said" (157) if she had been able to speak about Penelope to Gary. It reinforces the vision of a woman whose secret forces her to resort to silently speaking in her head. Italics suggest that these are not so much silent speeches as "silenced" ones—the words that Juliet *cannot* say aloud. They remind us that Juliet is denied the possibility of speaking to and about her daughter, they suggest that she has been "silenced" by Penelope's silence.
- 10 For all these silences, I would like to argue that another loss, another dismissal and another silence lie at the heart of "Silence". The story has a very linear, chronological structure, with the exception of one flashback to the death of Eric, Penelope's father, some ten pages into the narrative. The reader learns that Eric died by drowning, one summer "when Penelope was thirteen years old". The linear structure of the story and the fact that there is no other flashback testify to the importance of Eric's death, placing it at the heart of "Silence". Interestingly enough, it reveals what happened when Juliet and Penelope were away on a visit to Juliet's parents. The flashback in "Silence" provides the reader with the other side of the story since the visit was the main event in "Soon".
- 11 Eric's death is to be seen as the central event locked away at the heart of the story, locked away in the characters' memories, by their silence. With one exception, when Juliet breaks down, Eric's death seems to be a subject mother and daughter never speak about, reminding us of other Munro heroines such as Lisa ("Vandals", *Open Secrets*) or Karin ("Pictures of the Ice", *Friend of My Youth*), who keep silent about the tragedy in their lives. Penelope's silence is particularly striking. The flashback starts with a mention of Penelope—"when Penelope was thirteen years old (137)"—which should alert us to the importance of this event for Penelope. Yet nothing will be said about her reaction to her father's death or even her feelings for him, either in the flashback or in the rest of the story. The blank spaces that precede and follow the flashback remind us that what happens to Penelope in the seven years that follow Eric's death is a blank in the narration.
- 12 Penelope's silence starts from the moment she is told about her father's death at her friend's house. Although there is no explicit mention of her silence, it is quite clear she does not say a word since she is said to "receive the news with an expression of fright" and then of "embarrassment" (143-4). The very description of her subsequent actions indirectly reveals how silent she is. Penelope's silence is also made apparent through the frenzy of noisy activities she engages in in the month that follows Eric's death (144-5). It seems she only mentions Eric once, to dismiss him—"well I hardly knew him, really" (145)—probably answering a friend's kind or anxious words about her supposed grief. When Juliet breaks down, some six months after Eric's death, no mention is made of Penelope's feelings. When the narrator insists Juliet tells her "everything" ("Juliet told Penelope everything. Christa, the fight, the burning on the beach. Everything." p. 148), the reader realises how persistent Penelope's silence and her lack of emotional

reaction are. This silence will never be broken, nor will it receive any explanation. "Silence" does not only portray a woman who is the victim of her daughter's deadly silence, it also reveals a young woman who will not or cannot express her feelings.

- 13 The significance of Eric's death is revealed through the echoes that link the death, one summer after Penelope's thirteenth birthday, to her disappearance, a few weeks before her twenty-first birthday— and the very fact that we are provided with these time indications suggests a link. The young woman who chooses to disappear and refuses to speak to her mother is revealed to have, earlier in her life, "dismissed" her father: "and now he was dismissed. By Penelope [...] He who had filled her life. She dismissed him" (145). Not only does the repetition of "dismiss" highlight the importance of the act, so does the change from passive to active form, with Penelope becoming the subject of the second verb. Like her rejection of her mother, Penelope's dismissal of her father remains unexplained.
- 14 Both Eric's death and Penelope's silence leave matters unresolved for Juliet. There is strong insistence on the fact that the quarrel with Eric was left unresolved: "she wanted things resolved, and they were not resolved" (138) / "nor was their last quarrel entirely resolved" (146). As pointed out by Juliet in her second silent speech, Penelope has left without saying goodbye. Both Eric's death and Penelope's silence have foreclosed explanations, forgiveness and reconciliation. Imagery also creates echoes, suggesting Penelope's silence and Eric's death are to be pictured as losses Juliet might not recover from. Listening to Joan who is telling her Penelope has left, Juliet is said to feel "dread pour[ing] through her" (130), a rather banal image which is however echoed by the image used to describe Juliet's realisation that Eric is dead: "she feels as if a sack of cement has been poured into her" (147). In the first silent speech, Juliet's longing for her daughter is conveyed with an earth / rain simile (128) that implies the relationship was everything to her, so that in the flashback, Juliet's assertion that Eric's betrayal left her "bereft of all that had sustained her" (140) strikes an echo and suggests his death will take away everything that sustains her.<sup>10</sup>
- 15 Juliet pictures the death of her companion in literary, pictorial and theatrical terms and later reads the fate of her daughter in Greek literature and mythology. During the ceremony of burning Eric's body on the beach, Ailo is said to be playing the "role of Widow of the Sea"; and Juliet thinks of Eric's death and the burning of his body as being "like a pageant she had been compelled to watch" (146). The comparison with a pageant turns Eric's death into a play and a tableau. The nominal phrases—"the storm, the recovery of the body, the burning on the beach"—make the description read as possible titles for tableaux, and freeze the scenes into tableaux, as if Eric's death was being etched on her memory. The whole scene then grafts Eric's death onto a literary myth since looking at the pyre, Juliet thinks of the burning of Shelley's body (143). For Juliet, who bears the name of Shakespeare's most famous heroine and who gave her daughter the name of a Greek heroine,<sup>11</sup> thinks of her life in terms of works of literature and art, from the reference to Shelley's death (143), to the reference to Samuel Pepys' diary (140), to her comparing Penelope with a caryatid. Juliet will later read and research a Greek novel, *The Aethiopica* by Heliodorus, which will also bring us back, although indirectly, or "silently," to Eric's death. The reader is provided with a summary of *The Aethiopica*, but a comparison with other summaries reveals that this summary omits what seems to be *The Aethiopica*'s most famous episode<sup>12</sup> where the young heroine is about to be burned on a pyre (Book 8)—an omission which then

becomes a "silent" allusion to the burning of Eric's body,<sup>13</sup> reminding us of the silence that both Penelope and Juliet maintain over Eric's death. *The Aethiopica* resonates deeply for Juliet since it tells the story of the queen of Ethiopia's lost daughter. It is therefore also reminiscent of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. All the more so as "Silence" forcibly evokes an earlier story, "Save the Reaper,"<sup>14</sup> which, as Ildikó de Papp Carrington has demonstrated, offers a variation on the myth of Demeter. As Juliet reads and researches the Greek novel, which is said to have a "natural fascination" for her (152), her silence about her loss and her grief becomes apparent, suggesting the "fascination" silently expresses the feelings she will not voice. As Juliet considers turning *The Aethiopica* into a musical (152), the Ethiopian queen and Demeter become the voices that express Juliet's grief.

- 16 Weaving the fate of her heroines into *the Aethiopica*, and so into the myth of Demeter and Persephone, Munro both reminds us that much of literature and myth deals with loss and grief and provides her story with intricate layers of reading.
- 17 The third part of a trilogy, "Silence" does not seem to provide an ending or a resolution to it. It ties in with the other two Juliet stories in so far as all of them can be read as tales of loss. In "Chance" Juliet is said to give up her Greek—her knowledge of Greek and her passion for Greek literature—and this is explicitly described in terms of loss: "your bright treasure (...) A loss you could not contemplate at one time" (83). "Soon" reveals a growing estrangement between Juliet and her parents, and at its conclusion, Juliet refuses to answer her mother's cry of love, literally turning away (125). In "Silence," Juliet is made to lose her companion and her daughter. Yet when interviewed in January 2005 in a BBC Radio 4 literary programme, Munro seemed surprised to hear her interviewer say she had "turned against" her heroine. She protested, "I don't feel I gave Juliet a particularly hard time, she goes on living. She succeeds" (*Open Book*, BBC Radio 4, 16 January 2005).
- 18 For indeed Juliet is made to survive the death of her companion and the loss of her daughter. Juliet's delayed reaction to Eric's death both underlines the force of her grief and simultaneously suggests her ability to recover. A few months after Eric's death, a nightmarish reality solidifies her body as she suddenly realizes he is dead: "So this is grief. She feels as if a sack of cement has been poured into her and quickly hardened. She can barely move." (147) The simile forcibly recalls a passage in "The Children Stay", a story featuring a mother who is told she will lose her daughters if she leaves her husband for her lover:

A fluid choice, the choice of fantasy, is poured out on the ground and instantly hardens; it has taken undeniable shape.  
This is acute pain. It will become chronic. Chronic means that it will be permanent but perhaps not constant. [...] You don't get free of it, but you won't die of it." (*The Love* 212-3)
- 19 Hearing the echo, we are encouraged to read the image as indicating Juliet will neither get free of her grief—in both passages the present tense predominates, suggesting the permanence of pain—nor die of it. While the narrator stresses Juliet's incapacity to move, the rest of the story shows Juliet being able to move: to move on with her life, to use the cliché, or, to use Munro's phrase, to "go on living," surviving Eric's death, and then Penelope's disappearance.
- 20 Although she loses Eric and Penelope, Juliet recovers the "bright treasure" (83) she was made to lose in "Chance": her passion for Greek literature. She devotes most of her



time to reading and researching *The Aethiopica*, which is said to have a "continuing fascination" for her (152) and, as the narrator's remark about her "involvement with the old Greeks" on the last page shows, her interest has not abated by the end of the story. She is also said to "keep on with her studies" (158), which both underlines the importance of her research and reminds us that "Silence" portrays a woman who has found a way to go on. Juliet is also said to find her part time job "a good balance," a phrase that explicitly tells us that she has found some balance in her life.

- 21 The final page of the short story does strike a hopeful note. This is apparently due to a chance meeting with Heather, Penelope's friend, one summer evening, some fifteen years after Penelope has left (154-5). Talking to Heather, Juliet learns that her daughter is alive and well, the mother of five children, living in one of the northwest provinces. Juliet also realizes that Penelope has been keeping track of her as she told Heather Juliet still lived in Vancouver. Juliet also understands that, like her, Penelope has been silent about the breach. The meeting with Heather plays an important role as it is followed by another silence. Joining Gary, who had tactfully moved away while the women were speaking, Juliet lies about Heather's identity. Both Gary and Juliet keep silent, Gary either not noticing or pretending not to notice Juliet's agitation. This very silence makes Juliet see that the fact they have never mentioned Penelope means she will never live with Gary. She understands that this silence which cannot be broken might prove fatal, a form of death—as if Penelope had never existed. This is expressed in a silent speech in italics (157), whose function is to convey the words that Juliet cannot say to her lover.
- 22 Yet those are also the words that Juliet is finally able to say to herself. They show her acceptance of Penelope's character since she refers to "*some rock-hard honesty in her*" (158), which suggests she has come to terms with the hard streak in her daughter's nature. Although Juliet once again refers to the break-up, the agonising questions about her responsibility are notably absent. They have been replaced by assertions and hypotheses about Penelope herself: "*It is just a way that she has found to manage her life (...) It's maybe the explaining to me that she can't face*" (157). These eventually yield to Juliet's acceptance that the truth is not easy to get at (158). Juliet has both stopped blaming herself for the estrangement and looking for one simple explanation. Penelope's silence means Juliet has been denied explanations, but also that no single restrictive interpretation exists. Penelope's silence, therefore, allows numerous possible explanations, including a still unspoken desire for reconciliation, or regret for her silence, as Juliet surmises. Although Juliet accepts the possibility that Penelope may not like her enough to be with her, the very use of "*maybe*" in "*maybe she can't stand me*" (158) necessarily implies other possibilities. Modal verbs and phrases feature prominently in the silent speech, leaving the possibility of the reconciliation open, foreclosing closure.
- 23 The meeting and the unspoken monologue, therefore, prepare the reader for the last section. Most prominent in the last paragraph is the verb "hope," which occurs three times:

She keeps on hoping for a word from Penelope, but not in any strenuous way. She hopes as people who know better hope for undeserved blessings, spontaneous remissions, things of that sort. (158)
- 24 Juliet is waiting and hoping, thinking reconciliation is possible even though it will not necessarily take place. By the end of "Silence," it seems that Juliet will be able to



inhabit the space of silence that was first imposed by Penelope, on her own terms. The silence Penelope used as a weapon to wound her has been replaced by the silence that characterises waiting, in which what one hopes for is pictured or envisioned as possible. Munro's readers will hear the echoes of two, if not three, earlier stories from the *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* collection. Like "Floating Bridge", "Silence" ends on the possibility of remission. Like the heroines of "Comfort" and "Nettles"<sup>15</sup>, Juliet will choose inaction over action since she decides not to launch a search for Penelope. The lovers in "Comfort" and "Nettles" remain silent in order to preserve the relationship as both stories stress the power of memory and imagination to keep their love "alive".<sup>16</sup> "Nettles" equates two apparently contradictory possible futures: "It would be the same old thing, if we ever met again. Or if we didn't" (*Hateship* 187). Analysing *Open Secrets* and *The Love of a Good Woman*, Mark Levene remarks that in these collections, "what difference", the famous phrase from "Accident", "becomes refracted into the immensities of the possible" (Levene, 849). This is clearly the case in these later stories. In "Silence", there is no actual reconciliation taking place in the story, so that the Greek romance becomes the space where the reconciliation Juliet wishes for can take place. It is not so much the space in which her silenced grief is being expressed, as the space where the "immensities of the possible" are being refracted.

- 25 For the role of the Greek romance that features again prominently at the end of the story plays a key role in the reversing of the values of silence. Juliet devotes most of her time to reading and researching *The Aethiopica* and when she becomes friends with a man who teaches Greek, she collaborates in the idea of turning the novel into a musical. Not only does she make up songs for the musical, she thinks she could give it a different ending, shifting the focus away from the lovers' marriage towards the daughter's relationship to her mother—the daughter realising that what she wishes for is reconciliation with her mother:

She was secretly drawn to devising a different ending [...] the girl would be sure to meet [...] shabby imitations of what she was really looking for. Which was reconciliation, at last, with the erring, repentant, essentially great-hearted queen of Ethiopia" (152).

- 26 Juliet's resentment against Penelope's involvement with the Spiritual Balance Centre surfaces when she reflects that a beautiful maiden raised among the gymnosophists "might be left with some perverse hankering for a bare, ecstatic life" (152). Since the queen of Ethiopia is the one who abandons her daughter, Juliet is also constructing a vision of Penelope as a victim and of herself as the villain. Her depicting the queen as "erring" and "repentant" almost reads like an admission of guilt: Juliet, it seems, still blames herself for having lost her daughter. The verb "devise", however, signals a transition: she is no longer the passive observer who was compelled to watch a play<sup>17</sup> or the helpless actress brought to a "stage" to be involved in a play whose script had been written for her. From this moment, Juliet is both reading and creating; writing or incorporating, weaving, so to speak, her own story into the Greek tale, and with the tale, into Greek mythology.
- 27 *The Aethiopica* opens onto and leads us into another space, into the world of literature and myth, reversing the movement from open space to enclosed space on the diegetic level—from the house in Whale Bay to increasingly smaller flats to a basement flat. Juliet's life, fate and story are no longer contained in her actual life, and in actual space. In "Silence", Munro is both weaving the fate of her heroines into a larger and ancient

literary tradition, and leaving the geographical material space of her home country in which many critics confine her, for an altogether different space and world. With the Greek tale, reminiscent of a Greek myth, the reader is being invited to read other texts. The space of silence, at the end of the story, does not resonate with hopelessness anymore, rather, it is made to resonate with stories—stories to read, stories that go on to exist somewhere else.

- 28 "Silence", as the final page makes it clear, leads us into "a multiplied and utopian space": the space of reading (Block de Behar, 19). The final page draws the reader's attention to Juliet's studies and so to reading. Typography and punctuation alert us to the importance of the word "*investigations*", set off by the italics and the dash: "The word *studies* does not seem to describe very well what she does—*investigations* would be better" (158). Reading is therefore defined as a process. Reading as featured in and demanded by "Silence" is indeed "a co-action" rather than a re-action, "a shared participation" (Block de Behar, 22). The final page clearly reminds us that for Munro story-telling is "an art which elicits answers without itself giving any answers" (Block de Behar, 19), and that there is a "rhetoric of silence" at work in "Silence".
- 29 Silences on the diegetic level interplay with narrative reticence. Since the reader only has Juliet's point of view, Penelope remains an entire blank and mysterious character. This point of view will prove to be partial and subjective as the story progressively questions the opposition between silence and truth that was introduced in the first pages. In the opening pages, Juliet is said to be a gifted television interviewer, she is described as adept at communicating with people. Her first silent speech opposes the reticence that characterizes both Penelope and Eric to her own outspokenness: "*her nature is reflective, not all over the map, like mine. Somewhat reticent, like her father's*" (128). Juliet's reaction to Eric's infidelity and Christa's betrayal shows she comes down hard on those who do not tell the truth. Some twenty years after her friend Christa slept with Eric, Juliet still blames Christa, explicitly reproaching her for not telling the truth (134). Her accusations that Eric betrayed her are phrased along the same lines as she accuses him of having "lived a lie with her" (139). Juliet also reproaches Eric for wanting to avoid the confrontation while she is said to be intent on it so that their quarrel can be resolved. The description of the quarrel, however, strikes a discordant note since it underlines the fact that she endows the argument with dramatic flourishes, to the point that her part in it seems pure theatre—from her contentions, which, as the narrator notes, contain little truth, to her goodbye kiss which is play-acting (140). Finally, the fact that Eric's death immediately follows their unresolved quarrel, and the fact that frankness is associated with malice when Juliet learns of Eric's infidelity (138), further questions the emphasis or value put on truthfulness by Juliet. As the story progresses, Juliet is seen to opt for reticence, silence and lies. She tells Christa about her trip to Denman Island but the narrator notes that she had "hoped perhaps not to have to tell to anybody" (133). Furthermore, while she is said to have "told Christa the whole story of the trip" (133), the concluding paragraph of the passage demonstrates the opposite: "Juliet didn't tell her that in the end she had not been able to walk away with dignity" (135). When Juliet first considers going to the post-office in order to get information about the postmark, her fear of being recognized prevents her from doing so, suggesting she does not want people to know Penelope left (133). There is repeated insistence on the fact that only one person at a time gets to know about Penelope. Finally, Juliet resorts to lying, telling Penelope's

friends that her daughter is travelling (135). The only point of view the reader has is made to seem unreliable.

- 30 The reader is either confronted with unexplained silences—Penelope's and Juliet's—or offered several explanations that are all presented as valid, as in the case of Gary's silence.<sup>18</sup> Narrative silence and narrative reticence—which offers some grounds for the interpretative work—manipulate the reader into participating. Left with no explanations as to Juliet's silences and lies, the reader resorts to conjectures, from shame to an attempt to protect herself from the pain. Since Penelope remains forever silent, the reader forges hypotheses as to the reasons behind her refusal to speak to her mother. The vague explanation Joan puts forward—a spiritual dimension lacking in her life—is never denied since one phrase in Juliet's silent speech echoes a sentence uttered by the minister who reproaches Juliet for neglecting Penelope's religious education in "Soon": he concludes that rejecting God's grace for Penelope is "like denying her nourishment" (120). This will be echoed in "Silence" when Juliet evokes the six-month separation: "*like an old patch of cracked earth getting a full drink of rain*" (128). The simile will violently albeit silently bring us back to the first image, reversing the terms. So the reader is offered the possibility of accepting that Penelope turns away from her mother because she was denied religious education. The comparison with the caryatid and the allusion to the Greek tale, which both link Penelope to the revengeful goddess Artemis, encourage the reader to see her silence as an act of retribution. Yet, this vision does not put an end to the interpretations that can be put forward. Penelope's leaving the Centre before her mother arrives and her refusal to speak to her, eerily echo Juliet's silently turning away from her own mother at the end of "Soon" (125)—as if to suggest Juliet is being punished for having abandoned her own mother. It is the narrator's very silence about Penelope's silence over her father's death that alerts the reader to the importance of his death. The echoes between his death and Penelope's dismissal of her mother will therefore tempt the reader to see Penelope's silence as an attempt to punish her mother for having sent her away at the time of her father's death, if not for his death. However, the end of the story muddles our perception of Penelope as a revengeful maiden striking her repentant and guilty mother. The reader will eventually be presented with Juliet's resigning herself to the fact that there might be no specific motive behind the estrangement and that Penelope may simply not like her enough to be with her. Truth systematically eludes the reader, who is refused the solace of understanding.
- 31 The reader is also refused closure, just as the characters of "Silence" are. Eric dies in the middle of their quarrel, leaving matters unresolved. Death has silenced the quarrel, but has prevented its resolution, foreclosing forgiveness and reconciliation. Since Juliet is refused confrontation with her daughter, since nothing is said about their feelings, both mother and daughter are refused closure—the possibility to let go of their grief or anger. The final paragraph simultaneously offers hope and, with the word "remission", reminds us that Juliet does not emerge unscathed. In "Silence", to quote Judith Miller's analysis of Munro's way of writing, "no dichotomy opens [...] between the story told and its ways of working. Neither is privileged. They are wound into one another."<sup>19</sup> As the characters are denied closure, the reader is constantly refused the solace that traditional closure—the certainty about the characters' fate—offers. Although the final page is made to resonate with "hope," it simultaneously offers the possibility that the meeting and reconciliation may not take place. Penelope's silence has not been broken, and might never be so. At the end of "Silence", questions and doubt linger, hypotheses

alternate, and our reading shifts. This is what enables Munro's story to "keep on going", to "exist somewhere so that [...] it is still happening, or happening over and over again" (Watchel, 292). The story, as Munro wishes, cannot be "shut up in the book" (Watchel, 292); it goes on, haunting. All the more so as "Silence" resonates with many literary echoes, from Greek literature and mythology to the theatre, and echoes of other stories by Munro, reminding us that her stories constantly interweave themselves with many other books, and the world.

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## NOTES

1. Cf. Lisa Block de Behar, *A Rhetoric of Silence*, Berlin, New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 1995.
2. The passage is in italics.

3. The comparison also foreshadows her later transformation into Charicleia, the heroine of *The Aethiopica*, a Greek novel Juliet will research. According to the summary the reader is provided with, the girl becomes a priestess of Artemis (151).
4. "L'absence de mots est une arme, et une arme fatale", Jean-Jacques Lecercle, 13.
5. Munro, 129. Italics mine.
6. "She is what her mother would call a striking-looking woman", 126.
7. "Silence has the power to affect us and those around us (...) silence can heal and it can wound", Jensen, 250.
8. Jean-Jacques Lecercle underlines the power of silence, reminding us that reticence offers grounds for interpretation but also forces the person who is confronted by it to do most of the interpretative work while silence effectively forecloses meaning: "Enoncer, si l'on peut dire, un silence, c'est ne pas pleinement assumer son dire, mais l'indiquer cependant suffisamment pour que l'interlocuteur puisse faire le travail d'interprétation (...) le silence est ici exercice d'un pouvoir, il a sa propre force illocutoire. Absentant radicalement le sens, au moment même où il semble vouloir le faire entendre, il le fait proliférer", Jean-Jacques Lecercle, 12-13.
9. At the end of "Save the Reaper", the main character, a mother, is about to spend one last night in company of her daughter. She envisions a "hollowed-out house". *The Love*, 180.
10. Two other events take place in summertime: Eric's betrayal occurred during the summer month Juliet spent at her parents, when Penelope was one year old, and Juliet will meet Penelope's friend and thus hear about her daughter "one warm night in summer", 154.
11. It is no coincidence, therefore, Juliet insists: "We're never going to call her Penny", "Soon", 93.
12. Cf. the detailed summary of the *Aethiopica*, provided by the Petronian Society (Montclair State University): <http://www.chss.montclair.edu/classics/petron/heliodorus.html>.
13. It is no coincidence, then, that when Juliet meets Joan, and tries to think of a Christian historical figure bearing the name of Joan she thinks of Pope Joan-"Juliet, later, of course, thought of Pope Joan" (129)- therefore forgetting or omitting Joan of Arc, who was burnt at the stake.
14. Alice Munro, *The Love of a Good Woman*, 146-80. In "Save the Reaper", the estrangement between mother and daughter that "Silence" explores in depth is already suggested: the mother is repeatedly confronted by her daughter's reticence and reserve and has to endure her daughter's moving away from her, both physically (she is about to go back to California) and emotionally.
15. "Silence" also echoes "Nettles" since in this earlier story, a father has lost his son, and like Juliet, feels the need to hide the tragedy from most people and to have "a person who knew": "I was a person who knew-that was all", *Hateship* 185.
16. "love...yet staying alive as a sweet trickle, an underground resource", *Hateship*. 187.
17. "Like a pageant she had been compelled to watch", *Runaway*, 146.
18. "It was possible that Christa had told him, and he had remained silent out of a consideration that is was none of his business. Or that Christa had told him, and he had forgotten. Or that Christa had never mentioned anything about Penelope", *Runaway*, 157.
19. Miller Judith, "On Looking into Rifts and Crannies: Alice Munro's Friend of My Youth", *Antigonish Review* 120, 2000.

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## ABSTRACTS

Si "Silence", qui met en scène une mère punie par le silence manipulateur de sa fille, reprend un thème présent dans de nombreuses nouvelles d'Alice Munro – le rôle et le pouvoir du silence dans les relations humaines –, c'est en réalité à une exploration particulièrement complexe du silence, aussi bien sur le plan diégétique que narratif, que la nouvelle invite. Dans "Silence", où se joue une réverbération des silences, et qui laisse ses protagonistes dans un silence irrésolu, Alice Munro ne se contente pas d'exposer les politiques du silence, ni même de proposer un simple renversement des valeurs du silence. Avec "Silence", Munro nous invite à une réflexion sur la littérature et dévoile une poétique, si ce n'est une rhétorique, du silence.

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